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# The UK's social media ban for under-16s has just empowered big tech

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Age verification means that the sector's biggest players will now have access to information that will only make them richer and more powerful

Illustration: Nate Kitch/The Guardian

This week, the UK announced a wide-ranging ban on social media that will soon block users from communicating or accessing information on apps such as X, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat unless they prove that they're over the age of 16.

The prime minister, Keir Starmer, called the policy "a line in the sand". "Tech giants had their chance and failed," he said, "but we're stepping in to protect children, back parents and set a new normal for future generations." All internet users, especially children, should be protected from exploitative systems online, but this new law will only foster more harm and help the largest and most powerful tech companies consolidate power and influence over everyone's lives.

Details are yet to be confirmed, but in order to verify the age of a user, tech companies may require them to upload government ID along with an image for AI to verify. Soon, in addition to basic login information, tech companies could gather facial scans, detailed biometric data and highly sensitive info from millions of users. This is data that big tech companies previously may not have had access to.

The data is then used to build consumer profiles which are sold to advertisers for a profit or, more recently, used to train AI systems. To maximise profits, tech companies also use this data to deliver hypertargeted content to keep us engaged. Mark Zuckerberg explained this business model succinctly in April 2018 while being interrogated by members of Congress amid the Cambridge Analytica scandal. In response to a question from Senator Orrin Hatch, who asked how Facebook could possibly sustain a business model where users don't pay for the service, Zuckerberg responded: "Senator, we run ads."

All data is subject to protection laws when harvested and sold between companies, but it can also be stolen and exploited by bad actors. Intimate user data can be weaponised against people in myriad ways, including for identity theft, blackmail, abuse, or by governments seeking to crack down on free expression. Children are significantly more likely to experience these harms under age verification.

Proponents of age verification will say that instead of allowing these big tech platforms to harvest and collect data themselves, they can be forced to leverage third-party ID verification software. But rewarding third-party age-verification vendors with potentially billions of dollars' worth of new business only creates another layer of big tech. Third-party ID verification platforms are not separate from the powerful Silicon Valley ecosystem politicians claim to want to curtail. Persona, the leading third-party identity verification company, recently announced a $2bn valuation after its latest funding round co-led by Peter Thiel's Founders Fund.

Despite such concerns, some advocates have been calling for the government to go further still and enact tighter speech restrictions alongside age gating. They correctly point out that many children will still access content by circumventing the age restrictions or gravitate to even more harmful, less-regulated spaces on the internet. So, they seek to ban objectionable content from being uploaded in the first place or restrict its distribution by seizing control of algorithms.

But restricting content does not undermine big tech's core business model. All the major social platforms already abide by these types of censorship mandates elsewhere in the world and have shown repeated willingness to restrict content based on what a country's government does or doesn't like. They do this in order to retain a friendly regulatory environment and increase their scope, power and influence around the globe. In 2024, X suspended dozens of protesters' accounts in India after threats of fines and imprisonment if it did not comply.

In 2020, Facebook agreed to mass restrict anti-government content in Vietnam after the government throttled its services. According to TechCrunch, the company made the following statement in response: "We believe freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, and work hard to protect and defend this important civil liberty around the world. However, we have taken this action to ensure our services remain available and usable for millions of people in Vietnam, who rely on them every day."

Earlier this year, Meta and Snapchat began blocking the accounts of a slew of Saudi Arabian dissidents after orders by Saudi authorities. Meta told the Guardian at the time that when "something happens" on one of its platforms that is reported as violating local law but not the companies' own community standards, the company may restrict the content's availability in the country where it is alleged to be unlawful. Snapchat declined to comment. When governments have the ability to ask tech companies to monitor and censor content, there will always be the risk that authoritarians will use this power to suppress free speech.

If we actually want to curb big tech's power and make the internet safer for us all, including children, we must start by passing comprehensive data privacy regulation. Effectively, the exact opposite of what these "online safety" policies propose. We must rein in big tech the same way we have always effectively reined in corporate power: through antitrust litigation and targeting predatory, exploitative and anti-competitive business practices. Removing big tech's monopolistic control over our online lives would give adults and children access to a wider range of apps and online experiences tailored to meet their differing needs.

We need to make it easier, not harder, for less profit-driven platforms to compete with the tech giants. Verifying the identities and ages of all users is incredibly expensive for small platforms. Instead of driving non-profit, more user-friendly competitors off the internet by pursuing social media bans through age verification, the government should be fostering competition that would provide consumers and parents alike with more choice and opportunity for safe online expression and communication. If profit incentives are curtailed, more small, privacy-centred platforms could be developed, allowing young people to explore their identities and communities online safely.

The internet is a vital space for young people. It plays a crucial role in fostering friendships and social connection and can be a tremendous educational resource. But every single click or scroll a child makes should not be catalogued, tracked and leveraged for commercial gain. Young people should be able to communicate and explore ideas freely, alongside thoughtful guidance from their parents, without corporations or the government surveilling them.

If lawmakers are serious about protecting children, they should roll back age-verification policies and start targeting the systems that incentivise mass surveillance. Instead of building an internet where every user must ID themselves before being able to speak or consume information, we should work to build an online world where everyone, especially young people, can engage freely without being exploited for corporate profit.

Taylor Lorenz is a technology journalist who writes the newsletter User Mag and is the author of the bestselling book Extremely Online: The Untold Story of Fame, Influence, and Power on the Internet

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